

White Paper Report

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Rural Alaska Cultural Media Project: White Paper

Abstract

InterAK web portal (interakfilm.org) provides a hub for rural Alaskan students to engage in dialogue with students throughout Alaska regarding their student-produced documentary films, a place for teachers to access digital storytelling curriculum specific to their needs, and for scholars and the public to access youth produced documentary films. InterAK web portal outreach ranged from the North Slope to the Interior and South of the state, providing the groundwork to grow the model in the coming years and decades.

a. Project Activities

Web-portal Design and Structure

The Rural Alaskan Cultural Media project involved the creation of an interactive web portal for engaging scholars, rural Alaskan youth, and teachers, in creating and viewing films surrounding Alaskan culture and history. Specifically, the project involved creating the web portal called *InterAK* (www.interakfilm.org), developing the cultural filmmaking curriculum for rural Alaskan schools, preliminary implementation of the web portal, and evaluation of the project.

To build the web portal, we used a combination of the Wordpress and Omeka content management systems. Originally, we intended to build the web portal entirely on Omeka. However, upon initial website design and reviewing required features and the varying functions of Omeka and other CMSs, we determined that combination of Omeka and Wordpress on the website's "backend" would offer optimal features for social interaction among students, and organization of existing media for viewing by scholars. Additionally, we selected the "Buddypress" plugin for wordpress to enable social interaction among teachers and students across Alaska. This plugin allows students to create their own profiles on interAK and to comment on each other's films.

To design and develop the website, we used a framework for Wordpress that allowed us to leverage the strengths of Wordpress (flexibility, strong maintenance community, etc) and to interface smoothly with Buddypress. We chose the responsive Reverie framework and customized the HTML and CSS and added photos/graphics to optimize the design and layout. Additionally, we chose to utilize a variety of additional plugins to streamline the site content and

user interaction, including “Dynamic Widgets”, “Hide Title”, “Quick Page/Post Redirect Plugin”, “Responsive Wordpress Slider - Soliloquy Lite”, and “RV Embed PDF.” We designed the information architecture of the site to cater to differing user bases, including teachers, students, and the general public. The top-level pages include: “Curriculum,” “Community,” “About,” “Student Films,” and “Archives.” The home page includes a featured film and the ability to login to the InterAK community.

We integrated the Buddypress plugin, a social networking platform designed for Wordpress. The website homepage invites viewers to join the “InterAK Community” by registering and starting an InterAK profile. Registering for InterAK involves creating a username and password and optionally uploading a photo to visually represent their account. Users of the website can view other members and member activity. The social networking portion of the site enables students across Alaska to post media and communicate with each other about filmmaking activities. This feature is particularly relevant in rural Alaska, where the geographic distance between schools and communities is a logistical challenge for collaboration and communication. Using InterAK, students can build community around other digital storytellers.

The site includes a “Curriculum” section that is designed for teachers to access filmmaking curriculum. The curriculum was designed to align with Alaska State Educational Standards, including the “Alaska Culture Standards” which are designed specifically to engage Alaskan Youth in culturally appropriate activities and understandings. Each lesson was designed so that teachers could adapt it for 6th - 12th graders, a necessary feature for the rural Alaskan one-room-schoolhouse model. Flexibility was built-in to the lessons so that teachers and instructors would be able to work with limited supplies and a variety of student levels. The cross-curricular lessons include animation, storyboarding, interview techniques, film vocabulary, and more. Teachers can view the lessons on the site or download for future use. While we originally intended to make this section of the site private, we opted to open the curriculum up to the public so that teachers can easily access digital storytelling curriculum for use in classrooms or workshop settings.

The “Archives” section of the site is powered by Omeka, which is optimal for housing media. This section includes films made by students across Alaska, including “A Portrait of Nikolai,” “Medicine of Nikolai,” “Weather or Not,” “Silver Tip,” and more. Additionally, films can be viewed on the “student films” page where a map displays markers for every rural Alaskan community

where a student has produced a film that is viewable on InterAK. The map is designed as a visual and user-friendly mechanism for interfacing with student made media.

InterAK (interakfilm.org) will be continually hosted, and maintained by Media Action staff. The website content will change as students continue to upload films and other media content (as approved by website moderators). The site may be slightly refined and updated as needed for effective use by teachers, students, and the public, though the overall site structure and design will remain constant.

Project Outreach Activities

Media Action led a variety of conference presentations, partnerships, implementation trips, and teachers trainings in order to inform and educate teachers, students, and the public about the web portal's applicability for sharing and preserving youth perspectives on Alaskan culture and history. Specific outreach activities included the following:

Partnership with the North Slope Borough School District (NSBSD) throughout their Curriculum Alignment, Integration and Mapping (CAIM) process. The NSBSD (<http://www.nsbds.org/site/default.aspx?PageID=1>), one of Alaska's largest and most remote school districts, has launched CAIM (<http://www.nsbds.org/Page/560>) in order to develop a culturally sensitive curriculum that aligns with national and state standards as well as indigenous values as expressed by the Iñupiat community members living on the North Slope. To this end the NSBSD collaborated with the community to develop the Iñupiaq Learning Framework (ILF: <http://www.inupiaheritage.org/our-culture>). The NSBSD has worked with Media Action to develop culturally sensitive curriculum that integrated digital storytelling technologies and pedagogies with the ILF, with the ultimate goal of using the InterAK web-portal to showcase student films.

Project Director Marie Acemah travelled to Barrow, Alaska twice in the NEH digital humanities project term during a 3 day teacher in-service and a week long teacher post-service in order to integrate the InterAK webportal curricula with the NSBSD CAIM process and to train teachers about how they can utilize the InterAK film webportal into their classes. While the humanities teachers were targeted for the training, many of the science teachers were particularly interested as climate change is such an urgent issue in the Arctic, and students could explore and articulate the scientific and social dimensions of climate change via film. One student

provided a good example of such a film after a Media Action youth film workshop in Kaktovik, Alaska. Please see “Weather or Not” by Tracy Burns at the following link:
<http://vimeo.com/48033247>.

Partnership with Engaging Native Learners in Virtual Education Now (ENLIVEN). The Kodiak Island Borough School District (KIBSD) received the Alaska Native Education Equity grant (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/alaskanative/index.html>) for their ENLIVEN project, and collaborated with Media Action to lead film workshops and teacher trainings regarding the InterAK web portal. Media Action led a digital storytelling unit within a high school film as literature class for one month, and another digital storytelling unit within 7 middle school social studies class. Students used documentary film to explore Alaskan and Kodiak themes ranging from subsistence fishing to the immigrant experience. They are currently launching their films in the InterAK web portal in order to engage in dialogue with students across the state around their films and experiences as rural Alaskans. Throughout the ENLIVEN film workshops, three teachers were trained in how to utilize the InterAK web portal and integrate the curriculum into their classrooms so that they can utilize the resource in future years and share it with other teachers.

Partnership with Kodiak Island Borough School District (KIBSD) Artists in Schools Program. Through the Alaska State Council on the Arts, the KIBSD collaborates with artists to lead teacher trainings and student workshops in their district, including their village schools. They provided a cost-share to allow Media Action staff to lead film workshops in the village schools of Karluk and Larsen Bay for one week each. Media Action worked closely with students to produce documentary films, and with teachers to train them in the InterAK web portal usages as well as curricula. Students produced films on topics ranging from language preservation, subsistence hunting, the impact of canneries on Alutiiq Culture, and the history of one of Alaska’s oldest Russian Orthodox churches.

Media Action flew youth filmmaker Marina Cummisky to Karluk and Larsen Bay to assist with the student and teacher trainings, and to help particularly with the InterAK film training component. Marina had participated in many Media Action film intensives and was highly skilled in documentary film trainings, and connected well with the students as a peer. Marina produced a radio story on Kodiak’s public radio station about her experience in Karluk and Larsen Bay

that can be accessed at the following link:

http://www.kmxt.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=5568&Itemid=2.

Media Action led Conference Presentations about how the InterAK web portal can be utilized by Alaskan educators, students, and the general public. The teacher training components of our partnership with the North Slope Borough School District opened up conversations with science educators about the importance of helping students to make ethnographic films that capture the social dimensions of climate change in the Arctic and throughout Alaska (e.g. <http://vimeo.com/48033247>). Media Action was then invited to present the curricula and InterAK web portal at two conferences; the Kodiak Area Marine Science Symposium (<http://seagrant.uaf.edu/conferences/2014/kamss/program.php>) and the Alaska Marine Science Symposium (<http://www.alaskamarinescience.org>). Both conferences had a “Communicating Ocean Sciences” presentation that served to bridge the scientific community with educators and other community members in order to humanize the sciences and get youth engaged in documenting scientific processes. Media Action’s portion of the presentation provided an overview of the InterAK web portal curriculum component as well as the interactive functions that allow students and teachers to engage in dialogue throughout the state. The main conversation that started in the Communicating Ocean Sciences breakaway sessions was how to get rural kids involved in documenting environmental change (and consequent changes in subsistence practices) via the InterAK web portal in a manner meaningful for the students as well as for scientists trying to document change in our diverse and far-flung state.

b. Accomplishments

The project received publicity in Alaska, the following article and radio story being available online:

- *Alaska Public Media Town Square 49* published a story at the launch of the project: <http://www.alaskapublic.org/2011/11/21/engaging-alaskan-youth-in-digital-humanities/>
- *KMXT 100.1 Public Radio* had Marina Cummisky, Media Action Intern, produce an audio story about the film workshop model and InterAK web portal: http://www.kmxt.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=5568&Itemid=2.

These stories supported the dissemination of the InterAK web-portal, which in turn helped us to forge a partnership with the North Slope Borough School District which was beyond the scope of our original plan.

c. Audiences

The audiences for InterAK include students across rural Alaska, teachers, and the general public (with focus on scholars). The student audience includes 7th - 12th grade students participating in digital storytelling activities in rural Alaskan classroom, or through special workshops such as those facilitated by Media Action. This includes primarily students who attend schools in small Alaskan communities (or additional youth who have dropped out of high school but are participating in a digital storytelling workshop). This demographic includes primarily Alaska Native students in rural schools.

The user base of teachers includes teachers at rural Alaskan schools who want to implement digital storytelling activities into their curriculum. Teachers can access lesson plans and instruct their students in connecting with their peers across Alaska via the InterAK online community. Media Action has presented InterAK to teachers at rural Alaskan schools including North Slope Borough School District, the Iditarod Area School District, and the Kodiak Island Borough School District. This geographically diverse range of school districts includes schools ranging from the northernmost region of Alaska to the interior and the southcentral region (the island of Kodiak). At each school district, Media Action staff met with administrators and teachers to introduce the web portal and walk through demos of accessing and downloading digital storytelling curriculum.

The last user group is the general public with an interest in Alaskan culture and history, with focus on scholars. This user group can use the site to access films about topics relevant to Alaskan culture and history, accessible through the “Archives” section as well as the “Student Films” section.

d. Continuation of Project

The InterAK web portal will remain online and will receive basic maintenance. The overall goal of the project is to create a tool that allows Media Action's rural Alaska film education work to continue on relatively self-sustained, with little support from Media Action staff. Thus, continuation of the project via website utilization from target audiences is vital to the project's success. This will be achieved through continued basic support and outreach from Media Action staff. Depending on available resources and need for improvements, we may continue to refine the visual layout and function of the interAK web portal to maximize effective use by rural educators and students. Through the initial implementation of the web portal, we have strengthened working relationships and built additional contacts in several rural Alaskan school districts. These informal partnerships will be vital to promoting the continued use of interAK throughout rural Alaska.

e. Long Term Impact

Potential long term impacts from the project include increased overall engagement in culture and history-based filmmaking activities in Alaska's classroom. This will be measured by site activity over time and quantity / quality of videos uploaded to the web portal by students.

f. Grant Products

The product of this grant is the interAK web portal, publicly accessible at interakfilm.org.

Appendix

I. Sample lesson plan on Composition (please see below)



MediaAction

Ethnography and Digital Storytelling Curriculum Module: Lesson Plans Adaptable for 7 - 12th Grades for Rural Alaskan Educators

Lesson: Composition for Filmmaking

Vocabulary: *B-Roll* (Footage Secondary to Primary Source Interviews), *Wide-Shot*, *Medium Shot*, *Close-Up* (Depending on How Close You Are to Your Subject), *Panorama* (Moving the Camera Horizontally), *Tilt* (Moving the Camera Vertically), *Following the Action* (Moving the Camera with a Moving Object), *Fade-in/out* (When an object goes in or out of focus).

Alaska State Standards: Technology A.2 & 4

Activity	Objective	Assessment Tool
Explain to students that they will watch a short film and look at the different kinds of shots used (A good film to use is "Portrait of Nikolai" http://vimeo.com/14854233). Frequently pause the film so that the screen is frozen, and ask the class what they notice on the screen. After students make their observations say what the shot is (e.g. if it's an old photo, explain that it's an archival photo used for B-roll, if the camera is both following the action and doing a panorama, explain that, etc.). Write the terms down on the board. This exercise can happen with or without the volume, and you can go through the same short film twice.	Students understand composition concepts through the application of different compositional models in a film. Students grasp emotional and intellectual impact of different kinds of shots.	While students discuss different types of composition, assess for creative thought rather than correct answers, as composition is an aesthetic matter with a variety of interpretations. Promote participation rather than correctness at this point in the process.

Connect the camera to the TV so that students can see on the TV screen the camera footage in real time. Have students individually practice different shots (pan, tilt, Wide, Medium, and Close-Up Shots, Following the Action, Fade-in/out) while the rest of the class watches the screen. Prepare for giggles as students film each other, and an active, learning class. Provide feedback to students to make sure they have a clear understanding of each shot.	Students apply and practice their knowledge of compositional concepts.	Watch student composition and listen to the comments of students watching the composition. Provide immediate feedback to students who have an incorrect understanding, and also to students who are grasping the concepts accurately.
Have each student write in their journal a definition of each term in their own words. If they are confused that can ask you for assistance.	Students practice their knowledge of composition through defining terms in their own words.	Assess student definitions after class for accuracy.
Students go in pairs or as a whole group (depending on group size and camera equipment) to go get footage either around the school or around the community, making at least one shot according to each of the new terms.	Students practice their compositional knowledge and simultaneously gather B-Roll for their films.	Circulate among students and observe the shots they are getting, the conversations they are having, and how their shots connect to their films. Provide immediate verbal feedback.
Upon return, watch footage either at the end of class time or at the beginning of the next day to review the different types of shots obtained. Students should upload footage that they want to use for their final films immediately to their computer.	Students test their knowledge of composition by reviewing footage for feedback with classmates.	Watch student composition and listen to the comments of students watching the composition. Provide immediate feedback to students who have an incorrect understanding, and also to students who are grasping the concepts accurately.

Teacher Follow Up Activity: Make sure students uploaded footage they want to use onto their computers for the editing process. Optional: Have a test for students to define each term, or to match up the terms with their correct definitions.

